

## 2. *Venus and Adonis*

The history of Western civilization can be written as the story of the disastrous consequences of dualism. Dualism began in the ancient world as a philosophical and religious idea which gradually filtered into general consciousness and into language to the point where, from the Renaissance onwards, it became almost impossible for educated Europeans to think in any but a dualistic way. Dualism is the belief that everything in life can be divided into two opposing principles or constituents; but basically that matter and spirit are independent entities yoked together in life in violation of the essential nature of each. About two thousand five hundred years ago, a remarkable change took place in man's concept of the gods, the movement towards monotheism, a single male godhead existing independently of the created universe as pure spirit. In its most extreme form this leads to the universal dichotomy of God on one side and the world, the flesh and the devil on the other. Dualism sunders god and nature. It also sunders male and female, encouraging man to frame concepts of militant heroism which ride roughshod over the female in all its manifestations. And it sunders mind from body.

Dualism might not have been so disastrous had it not so often involved value judgements. That is, one of the artificially separated components is usually labelled good and to be fostered, the other bad, to be eliminated or suppressed. Thus man wages war against his own wholeness and the wholeness of his world, in the attempt to impose his own will, vain aspirations and blinkered vision on the world.

In the Middle Ages these beliefs were expressed in elaborate systems and hierarchies such as the Great Chain of Being. This envisaged the whole of creation as a chain each link of which was a species or class of objects. The chain descended from the throne of god, passed through all the heavenly orders - seraphs, cherubs, thrones, denominations, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels to man, and then down through the beasts, birds, reptiles, fishes, plants and minerals, ending at the lowest stone. The image of links in a chain implied that each species shared properties or attributes with those above and below it.

The position of man in the great chain was critical, since that link alone had to hold together the heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material creations. And every individual man had to find a way of coping with the division of his being between faculties he shared with the angels, his reason and judgement, and those he shared with the beasts, his appetites, instincts and passions, and, of course, his mortality. Such a man is primed for tragedy.

Awareness of this problem and the stating of it in these terms had remained constant for over two thousand years, from Pythagoras through the Platonists and neo-Platonists to such Renaissance thinkers as Pico della Mirandola and Giordano Bruno, who was in England in 1583-5, where he met or influenced Raleigh, Marlowe, Sidney and John Dee (the original of Prospero).

Never was the problem more acutely felt and widely discussed than in Elizabethan England. Two very different views were held about how man should attempt to solve the riddle of his own divided nature. The more common was to assume that the chain was also a ladder, and that the duty of man was to climb as high as possible. An Elizabethan formulation of this idea was the translation of Romei's *Courtier's Academy* published in 1598 (two years or so before *Hamlet*):

It is in our power to live like a plant, living creature, like a man, and lastly like an angel; for if a man addict himself only to feeding and nourishment he becometh a plant, if to things sensual he is a brute beast, if to things reasonable and civil he groweth a celestial creature; but if he exalt the beautiful gift of his mind to things invisible and divine he transformeth himself into an angel and, to conclude, becometh the son of God. [Tillyard 75]

But others held that if God had wanted us to be angels, he would have created us angels in the first place; that to aspire above the place allotted to us in the scheme of things was to fall into the sin of pride; that the unique challenge to man was to accept and attempt to reconcile within him the opposing forces, to achieve a balance and harmony of his faculties. Theologians and moralists tended towards the first party, poets towards the second.

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Shakespeare, throughout his works, accuses himself of every offence man is capable of, including, centrally, the crime against Nature. I do not say only that he accuses his characters, because Shakespeare's major characters are not invented to castigate human vices and follies (in the manner of Ben Jonson); they are projections from the depths of his own psyche. Shakespeare's universality stems not from his knowledge of all types and conditions of men (though that he no doubt had), but from his knowledge of himself and his ability to probe, imaginatively, even the unacknowledged parts of himself. It is not a 'negative capability', committing himself to neither side, but the very positive capability of committing himself to both. He suffers with those who suffer, but he is also the cause of that suffering. His psyche is the battleground on which all conflicts (but primarily the sexual and the religious) are waged. As in all great imaginative art, his works are (as Hughes expresses it) a perpetual search for truer metaphors for his own nature. And that nature happened to be more complex, more all-embracing, more honest, and more receptive to 'the age and body of the time, his form and pressure', than any other of which we have record. Thus all the plays are, in a sense, history plays.

But just as Greek tragedy was both a record of a crisis in the history of Athens and in human consciousness, and also an embodiment of permanent truths about the human condition, equally relevant after two and a half millennia, so Shakespeare also dramatizes the persistent polarization of the male psyche. As Hughes puts it:

At one pole is the rational ego, controlling the man's behaviour according to the needs and demands of a self-controlled society. At the other is the totality of this individual's natural, biological and instinctual life. ... From the point of view of the rational ego this totality appears to be female, and since it incorporates not only the divine source of his being, the feminine component of his own biological make-up, as well as the paranormal faculties and mysteries outside his rational ego, and seems to him in many respects continuous with external nature, he calls it the Goddess. Obviously, this is only a manner of speaking, or of thinking, but it is one

that has imposed itself on man throughout his history.  
[*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, 513]

The hero's crime is the rejection of this Goddess. It is a crime not only against her and himself, but against humanity, since she is the source of life:

It is the sin which every tragic hero commits, and it can be described as a failure of understanding, that alienation from the 'understanding heart' which ... has to be exposed, condemned, punished, corrected, and eventually redeemed. [231]

The whole process has been brilliantly charted by Hughes in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, with a depth of imaginative engagement possible only for another great poet. That book appeared as I was revising this essay, but some of its ideas had been adumbrated twenty years earlier in *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, to which I have been much indebted.

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What was to become by 1600 a tempest of the mind, the crucible of the tragedies, started out in 1592 as a sophisticated conceit to please a patron, a daringly erotic best-seller. But even when he wanted to, Shakespeare was incapable of writing superficially. He could no more keep his deepest concerns out of *Venus and Adonis* than he could keep Herne the Hunter out of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* or the morose Jaques out of *As You Like It*.

The story of *Venus and Adonis* is very simple and could be very quickly told. Venus woos Adonis. He resists, being disgusted by what he calls 'lust'. Venus tries everything, but fails to prevent him leaving her to go hunting. Later, having a premonition of disaster, she goes in search of him and finds his body savaged by a boar. He is transformed into a purple flower which she plucks and puts between her breasts. Nothing else happens. But Shakespeare elaborates this story to the tune of 1194 lines. Given his extreme economy and concentration in both the sonnets and the plays, why this prolixity? The simple story, chosen consciously, perhaps, as a witty cautionary tale to persuade the young Southampton, to whom it is dedicated, not to resist marriage (the theme also of the first seventeen sonnets), seems to have engaged with much larger and deeper issues which forced Shakespeare to dwell with fascination on its details and implications. Such fascination was justified, since this myth was to provide, as it were, a paradigm for all his mature work. It enabled him to combine, at the level where imagination finds its metaphors, his own most personal problems (his exile from Stratford and his family, his unrequited love for both a man and a woman, their betrayal of him, his covert Catholicism in an officially and repressively Protestant age) with the problems, the seething repressed energies, of Elizabeth's reign, energies which she contained with a reign of terror, but which were later to erupt in regicide and civil war.

The fact that Shakespeare returned obsessively to this theme and these images throughout his career suggests that he had, almost accidentally, tapped a source of disturbing conflict in his age and in himself. Venus is the great goddess treated as a witch

and a whore by the Puritans. She is also the voice of his own misused anima calling to the creative imagination for redress.

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The first thing we are told about Adonis is that 'Hunting he loved, but love he laughed to scorn'. The pagan Goddess invites him to come 'where never serpent hisses', but Adonis inhabits a fallen world where her unabashed sexuality causes him to burn with shame, not desire. Venus, 'having no defects', cannot understand the basis of his rejection. She is herself Nature ('My beauty as the spring doth yearly grow'). Her body is a landscape with mountains, dales and pleasant fountains

Sweet bottom-grass, and high delightful plain,  
Round rising hillocks, brakes obscure and rough

where Adonis like a deer may safely graze. Therefore, in her terms, his rejection of her is unnatural. She marshals exactly the arguments Shakespeare deployed in the early sonnets to persuade Southampton to marry. She accuses him of being sick with self-love, narcissistic, and parasitic upon the natural world:

Beauty within itself should not be wasted.

Things growing to themselves are growth's abuse.  
Seeds spring from seeds, and beauty breedeth beauty.  
Thou wast begot; to get it is thy duty.

Upon the earth's increase why shouldst thou feed  
Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?  
By law of nature thou art bound to breed,  
That thine may live when thou thyself art dead.

In the third sonnet Shakespeare asks his patron:

Or who is he so fond will be the tomb  
Of his self-love to stop posterity?

And the next sonnet expands on this:

Unthrifty loveliness, why dost thou spend  
Upon thyself thy beauty's legacy?  
Nature's bequest gives nothing but doth lend,  
And being frank she lends to those are free.

Shakespeare here comes perilously close to saying that to be thus in love with oneself ('having traffic with thyself alone') is to prefer masturbation to the unconditional offering of the self to the other which is love as Venus embodies it.

This theme is graphically illustrated in the incident of Adonis' horse which, as he goes to mount him, sees 'a breeding jennet, lusty, young, and proud'. Unlike his master, the courser needs no invitation, but

Breaketh his rein, and to her straight goes he.

Imperiously he leaps, he neighs, he bounds,  
And now his woven girths he breaks asunder;  
The bearing earth with his hard hoof he wounds,  
Whose hollow womb resounds like heaven's thunder;  
The iron bit he crusheth 'tween his teeth,  
Controlling what he was controlled with.

Once free, the horse ceases to be violent and begins to behave with 'gentle majesty and modest pride'. The violence transfers itself to the rider, whose 'angry stir' the horse completely ignores:

He sees his love, and nothing else he sees,  
For nothing else with his proud sight agrees.

Pride seems to be the key, what Hopkins calls 'This pride of prime's enjoyment':

Round-hoofed, short-jointed, fetlocks shag and long,  
Broad breast, full eye, small head, and nostril wide,  
High crest, short ears, straight legs and passing strong,  
Thin mane, thick tail, broad buttock, tender hide:  
Look what a horse should have he did not lack,  
Save a proud rider on so proud a back.

The very language here rears and curvets. It needs no caparisons or trappings. A mere Whitman-like listing of the horse's physical attributes is enough. And indeed there is a remarkably similar passage in 'Song of Myself', except that Whitman provides his horse with a worthy rider:

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,  
Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,  
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,  
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.  
His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,  
His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return.  
I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,  
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?  
Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

What, then, is lacking in Adonis, what curbs his proud manhood, what iron bit controls him? It is impossible to use such metaphors without remembering the famous

passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* where the driver of a chariot (will or ego) has to deal with a recalcitrant horse (desire or libido), which, through his puritan spectacles, he can see only as ugly: 'crooked, lumbering, ill-made; stiff-necked, short-throated, snub-nosed; his coat is black and his eyes a bloodshot grey; wantonness and boastfulness are his companions, and he is hairy-eared and deaf, hardly controllable even with whip and goad'. When this horse tries to take the bit between its teeth, and rush forward prancing towards the object of its desire, 'the driver ... falls back like a racing charioteer at the barrier, and with a still more violent backward pull jerks the bit from between the teeth of the lustful horse, drenches his abusive tongue and jaws with blood, and forcing his legs and haunches against the ground reduces him to torment. Finally, after several repetitions of this treatment, the wicked horse abandons his lustful ways'; meekly now he executes the wishes of his driver.' What I mean by calling this attitude puritanical is clear, I think, from a passage a few pages earlier in the *Phaedrus*: 'Pure was the light and pure were we from the pollution of the walking sepulchre which we call a body, to which we are bound like an oyster to its shell'.

Adonis is blind to the beauty of his stallion, and gives it no chance to respond to his caresses. He seeks to subdue its nature entirely to his purposes (which are to escape from Venus and to go hunting). He is equally blind to the beauty of Venus, since he cannot but see the love which declares and offers itself as anything but lust. The imagery Shakespeare chooses to describe Adonis' rejection of her would be absurdly hyperbolic were he merely embroidering the romantic cliché that 'looks kill love'. What he is actually doing, as surely as with the images of storm and savage beasts in *King Lear*, is presaging the chaos which follows when Nature herself is violated:

Like a red morn that ever yet betokened  
Wrack to the seaman, tempest to the field ...  
Or as the wolf doth grin before he barketh,  
Or as a berry breaks before it staineth,  
Or like the deadly bullet of a gun,  
His meaning struck her ere his words begun.

Adonis, by his rejection, is releasing destructive energies into the world. As he sees Venus tempting him to the sin of lust, she becomes, in his eyes, not Venus the Queen of Heaven but the foul witch Hecate, the Queen of Hell:

For by this black-faced night, desire's foul nurse,  
Your treatise makes me like you worse and worse.

Venus approves the behaviour of Adonis' horse, saying that deep desire should have no bounds. But Adonis replies:

I know not love,' quoth he, 'nor will not know it,  
Unless it be a boar, and then I'll chase it.

By thus treating love as a boar, a foul and dangerous thing to be fought and killed, Adonis begins the process of converting Love (Venus) into a boar. For the first half of the

poem Venus has been pleading and softly feminine, but now a transformation begins. Just as Dionysus, in his feminine aspect, spends half *The Bacchae* trying to win over Pentheus with gentle persuasion, but is at last transformed by Pentheus' own violent rejection into his opposite, male and murderous, the bull, so Adonis forces Venus to become more and more predatory, actually converts her love into ravening lust:

Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,  
And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth.  
Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,  
Paying what ransom the insulter willeth;  
Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high  
That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry.

And having felt the sweetness of the spoil,  
With blindfold fury she begins to forage;  
Her face doth reek and smoke, her blood doth boil,  
And careless lust stirs up a desperate courage,  
Planting oblivion, beating reason back,  
Forgetting shame's pure blush and honor's wrack.

By attempting to separate out 'pure' love, which is completely subservient to reason, shame and honour, from the totality of love Venus had originally offered him, Adonis splits Venus into the trembling, heartsick woman who warns him so graphically against the boar, and the boar itself. He speaks to her like Hamlet to his mother:

Call it not love, for Love to heaven is fled  
Since sweating Lust on earth usurped his name.

But, as with Hamlet, his definition of lust leaves no room for love in bodily terms.

Venus is clearly Nature, and Nature is not divisible. In her loving phase, she associates herself with timid and vulnerable creatures. If Adonis must hunt, she says, let him hunt creatures which cannot harm him, the hare, for example. But Venus can describe the hunting of a hare only from the point of view of the hare. She 'goes into a hare With sorrow and sighs and mickle care', but Adonis is unmoved by the sufferings of poor Wat. Again, she goes into 'a milch doe, whose swelling dugs do ache, Hasting to feed her fawn'. And again into a snail, 'whose tender horns being hit Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain'. Adonis drives her back in pain into the darkness, the underworld, from which she emerges frothing at the mouth. She warns him in the clearest terms that to choose the boar is to choose death (which Venus calls 'divorce of love') in preference to life, to commit suicide. In rabid defence of his self-sufficiency he strikes out at all forms of love, including sympathy, the ability to suffer with those that suffer; he strikes at the feminine in all its forms - woman, Nature, his own anima. Richard of Gloucester's words would not be out of place in his mouth:

And that word 'love', which greybeards call divine,  
Be resident in men like one another,

And not in me! I am myself alone.

(Richard's totem is the boar.) And when he swears by 'black-faced night, desire's foul nurse' he is on the way to transforming himself into a Tarquin or a MacBeth. The extreme, frigid, love-denying, life-denying puritanism of an Angelo is the perfect breeding ground for the boar, the murderous tyrant.

Finding the mangled body of Adonis, Venus in her distraction cannot distinguish between herself and the boar:

If he did see his face, why then I know  
He thought to kiss him, and hath killed him so.

'Tis true, 'tis true! thus was Adonis slain:  
He ran upon the boar with his sharp spear,  
Who did not whet his teeth at him again,  
But by a kiss thought to persuade him there;  
    And nuzzling in his flank, the loving swine  
    Sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin.

It is a just reversal, since Adonis, terrified by the thought of the soft groin of Venus, is keen enough to plunge his spear into the living body of Nature. Venus then stains her own face with Adonis' blood.

She means, at the end, to 'immure herself and not be seen'. Love goes underground, and becomes, instead of a source of joy and harmony and fertility, a cause of suffering, discord, 'war and dire events'. All this would be absurdly disproportionate if it were a consequence of one young man desiring 'to grow unto himself'. But clearly much more than that is involved. Adonis may begin as Southampton, but he rapidly becomes a part of Shakespeare also, a part of those who were shaping English history at that time, and a part of each of us. He represents the Protestant attempt to degrade the Queen of Heaven to the Great Whore, but also the perennial male rejection and desacralization of Nature in the name of some perfection or abstraction assumed to be accessible only to the detached male intellect.

The character of Adonis we are to meet again and again in the mature works. In middle age he is called Angelo, and is still attempting to freeze out unconditional love in the form of Mariana. In later life he is called Prospero, now devoting his most potent Art to excluding Venus from the magic circle of his isle. In between, there will be the tragedies, where love, as Venus prophesies, will always be attended by jealousy and betrayal:

It shall be fickle, false, and full of fraud;  
Bud and be blasted, in a breathing while;  
The bottom poison, and the top o'erstrawed  
With sweets that shall the truest sight beguile.  
    The strongest body shall it make most weak,  
    Strike the wise dumb, and teach the fool to speak.

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